

Hmong refugee needs assessed

Many set to arrive in Fresno this year from camp in Thailand.

By Barbara Anderson
The Fresno Bee

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Hmong refugees set to arrive in Fresno later this year from a camp in Thailand will need medical, dental and mental health care during their resettlement, members of a refugee task force said Wednesday.

Many of the refugees have lived their entire lives inside the Wat Tham Krabok refugee camp in Thailand and have had little or no health care, said Pai Yang, Valley Catholic Charities refugee resettlement director.

"They have lived locked up," Yang told members of the Hmong Refugee Task Force Health Sub-Committee.

Dr. Edward Moreno, Fresno County's health officer, is co-chairman of the health subcommittee. In April, he will travel to Thailand to assess refugees' health-care needs.

Other members of a contingent of Fresno community leaders will look at housing, education and employment needs that refugees likely will have when they arrive in Fresno.

"The goals are to identify needs and prioritize services and resources," Moreno said.

Moreno said refugees' health will be evaluated in Thailand before their arrival in the United States, but once in Fresno, they will receive a health screening at the Fresno County Refugee Clinic.

The new arrivals will be asked about their health history and given a tuberculosis skin test and immunizations.

County health workers also will help refugees apply for Medi-Cal, the state-federal insurance program for the low-income and disabled.

The county will help refugees find doctors if they have medical problems, Moreno said.

Moreno said the county has asked the state for funds to pay for extra staff to provide refugees with health care.

"We don't want to delay any services," he said.

Yang said Fresno can expect about 100 to 200 refugees this year, with more coming in 2005. Fresno County is home to almost 28,000 Hmong, most of whom live in Fresno or Clovis.

Many of the Hmong fled to Thailand at the end of the Vietnam War, before migrating to the United States and other nations.

The Hmong lived in the mountains of Laos and aligned themselves with the Americans during the war.

As political refugees, Hmong are eligible for resettlement services, including health care, Yang said.

Ghia Xiong, co-chairman of the health subcommittee, said cross-cultural education will be important for refugees and health-care providers treating them.

Doctors need to be educated about their new patients' culture, and refugees need to understand Western medical practices in order for trust to exist between the family and the doctor, he said.

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"With this new wave of refugees coming in, we want to prevent [problems] escalating," he said.

David Caes, a Fresno County senior analyst in the county's mental health managed care division, said refugees could have mental health problems to overcome from years of isolation in the camp.

Post-traumatic stress syndrome and depression are two possible mental health concerns, he said.

"A lot of them have been in camp for more than a decade," Caes said. "And that's a long time to be in an environment like that."

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